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THEMATIC CATEGORIZATION OF IJỌ OWU (MASQUERADE) SONGS AS ORAL POETRY

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Abstract
This study examines masquerade (Owu) songs as a form of African trado-religious poetry among the Izón-speaking people, using both formalist and sociological literary approaches. The research evaluates the internal structure and artistic form of the songs alongside analyzing their socio-cultural significance within the community. Drawing on Awoonor's model of classification, the study categorizes the songs into three functional types: social, occupational, and religious. The formalist theory emphasizes the intrinsic aesthetic and linguistic features that characterize Owu songs, while the sociological framework explores the reciprocal relationship between the songs and the social milieu from which they emerge. By blending both critical perspectives, this study highlights the cultural vitality and literary richness of African verbal art forms.

Keywords: Masquerade, Owu songs, Izon, Trado-religious poetry

1.0 Introduction

The content of masquerade songs, as a form of traditional poetry, is largely shaped by the social and cultural experiences of the artist within their society. Folk songs are deeply influenced by social, cultural, and political institutions, and the physical environment of a community informs the sensibilities and expressions of its people. Poetic expressions thus serve as a medium through which individual experiences and societal value systems are interpreted. The artist exists within a society that both influences and is influenced by various socio-cultural and socio-political forces. As Warton observes, "Literature has peculiar merits of faithfully recording the features of the times of man in the society and of presenting the

most picturesque and expressive representation of manners and customs" (Warton, 1). These manners and customs are embedded in the traditions that poetry seeks to reflect.

Therefore, to fully understand and appreciate poetic expressions as part of a people's socio-cultural system, it is essential to explore the cultural background from which they emerge. Cultural knowledge provides the foundational source material for this study. Trado-religious poetic expressions represent the attitudes and modes of communication shaped by a society's economy, philosophy, and psychology. In this context masquerade (owu) songs are performed to mark various events. These songs serve multiple functions: they critique individuals, provide instruction, convey moral values, and entertain. Based on their thematic content, these songs can be broadly categorized into three groups: social, occupational, and religious. Their analysis as poetic expressions of cultural identity, rehabilitation, and preservation informs the focus of this study.

Furthermore, a review of relevant scholarship reveals how oral poetry has historically drawn upon their environments to reflect the way of life in their communities. The masquerade (Owu) songs, as a form of trado-religious poetry, are composed and rendered in the Ijaw language, which is spoken widely in Southern Nigeria. According to Alagoa, the Ijaw language forms a distinct group within the "Kwa-branch of the Niger-Congo family in the Niger Delta" (Alagoa, 43). Today, Ijaw speakers are found across Ondo, Delta, Rivers, Edo, Akwa Ibom, and Bayelsa States. A common language enables communication either through local dialects or an agreed standard form.

Despite dialectal variations, the cultural life of the Ijaw people remains largely homogeneous. This shared culture, belief system, and customs lend Owu songs—considered trado-religious poetry—a common meaning that reflects the cultural environment. This position aligns with the view that there exists "a subtle but quite defensible relationship between art and the landscape out of which it grows" (Okpewho, 47). For instance, if the surrounding vegetation is clean, the legends and songs derived from it will reflect that cleanness. As Raymond puts it, "culture is an essential revolution, the true interaction between patterns learned and created in the mind and patterns communicated and made in relationships, conventions, and institutions" (30). This study focuses primarily on the Kolokuma dialect of the Ijaw language, although the songs analyzed may span various Ijaw dialects.

The abundance of water bodies in the region has made fishing a central economic activity among the Ijaw people. Consequently, songs that reference marine life and fishing practices are prominent in masquerade (Owu)

performances. These songs are typically marked by a fast, almost martial rhythm, established by the steady marching and powerful voice of the lead singer. They are closely associated with masquerades (Owu) through myths about their origin and often explore diverse social themes.

Although many Owu songs reference water spirits, they vividly reflect the everyday realities of Ijaw life. Another widespread economic activity is canoe carving, which arises naturally from the region's aquatic terrain. The need for transportation across water led to the development of canoes as a principal means of communication between communities. Farming also exists but is generally subsistence in nature. The primary crops cultivated include plantain and water yam. Cassava is produced in small quantities due to frequent flooding. The relative accessibility of village settlements also contributed to the historically aggressive and warlike nature of the people. "The large number of linguistic sub-groupings can also be associated with the environment. Local dialects developed as a result of the difficulties in inter-group communication. The isolated nature of village settlements due to these communication challenges helped breed linguistic differences" (Sorgwe, 17).

2.0 Theoretical Framework

Numerous critical approaches have been applied to the study of African folk literature. For this study, the formalist and sociological approaches are deemed most appropriate for analyzing African verbal art forms. This choice is guided by the centrality of folk practices in African culture and their expression through language. Formalist critics argue that art derives its meaning, purpose, and value from its internal structure, independent of external contexts such as science or society. This approach is "more interested in analysis of form, structure of texture of language, rather than in the content" (Carter, 13). Formalism is both a methodology and a practical tool for literary analysis, focusing on how words, phrases, and images convey meaning. According to this view, literary works should be judged by how well they unify their components, with artistic meaning considered an intrinsic quality of the work itself.

In contrast, the sociological approach posits that "art's relationships to society are vitally important, and that the investigation of these relationships may organize and deepen one's aesthetic response to a work of art" (Scott, 126). Sociological critics examine the connections among the artist, the artwork, and the surrounding social environment, recognizing the implicit judgments embedded within these relationships. They view the relationship between literature and society as reciprocal. In this context, the present study explores masquerade (Owu)

songs as trado-religious poetry, analyzing both their formal characteristics and their function within

3.0 Classification of masquerade (Owu) Songs

In making a classification of Owu songs, it is a desire to use a functional approach. Also, it is the desire of the researcher to adopt Awoonors model of classification. The Owu songs as trado-religious poetry are divided into three broad groups which are social, occupational and religious songs.

3.1. Social Songs

The group classified as social songs comprises dirges, Praise/Abuse and war songs. The Owu songs of the Ijaw people, hinges on diverse themes. The dirge in the tradition of the Owu songs is philosophical; seeks the meaning and purpose of life; has expected tone of solemnity; and is portrayed through the miming of the characteristics of aquatic, forest and even domestic animals. It reveals the loneliness and sorrow of death, fear and uncertainty of what the next stage of the journey is, and finally a message. These features can be shown from the dirge that follows:

Dirges

Ye inegha
Obiri you mo You ghaeee
Obiri you mo You ghaeee
Obiri you you mo ongolosei
Keni yenghibo arau fikpo erimoYoughaeee
Keni daubo owei fekpo erimoYoughaeee
Obiri you you mo ongolosei.

Translation:

No Endurance
Dog is crying and not crying
Dog is crying and not crying
Dog has cried until he is dehydrated
He has seen the death of a half-sister and did not cry
He has seen the death of half brother and did not cry.
Dog has cried until he is dehydrated.

The dirge is a picturesque representation of the pains and sorrows of losing a brother or sister to the cold hands of death. The song presents dog as an animal that does not have a sense of endurance or patience. These features are portrayed through the song and the dog masquerade. Importance is attached to the words over the simple melody, which serves only as a vehicle to convey the basic ideas of the poetry. The melody of the song/poetic expressions gives a persistence that tends to relieve the audience of their burden of sorrows. For example, in the poetry, words such as "ongolosei" (dehydrate),"keniyengi"(the same mother), "kenidau" (the same father), reveal the sorrows and melodious effects to keep the audience's attention to ease their burden.

3.2 Praise Songs

The largest sub-group under social songs is praise songs. Since it is obvious that, within the masquerade (Owu) song tradition, the transition from praise to abuse is swift. Praise singing is part of Owu song tradition. Bird observed that:

> Speech itself is considered to contain this energy as denotes the expression: Nyamabe kumala. The energy of action is in speech. When a praise song is sung for someone, his energy to act is augmented thus forewing him to act.(98)

The spirits have their own laudatory epithets which refer to the characteristics of the masquerades. In addition, when the Owu or masquerades are to be called, the praise songs are sung one after another until they take possession of the performers. The praise songs are addressed to the spirits which the masks represent. "The bulk of their masquerades however represent manifestations of water spirits whose identity may be known, are possessed by the spirits they are representing" (Onuora quoted in Ogunbiye, 133). Therefore, the scope of the songs includes legends, mythodology and history, which make the delivery ceremonial and elaborate. The legends, myth and history could be illustrated from the following song as an example of praise songs.

Owu Ebiye Ama

Beni perekpo ebi
Kimi kpoebi
Isele bibi bein

Ahan Owu ebiye ama
Uh! Uh! Uh!

Translation:

Splendid Masquerade
King of the river is handsome
Handsome is the man too
A mouth full of red
Splendid is the masquerade
Uh! Uh! Uh!

3.3 (a) Abuse Songs

The song of abuse has been a regular feature of the Owu songs for a very long time. Some of its features include verbal agility, exaggeration, and elaborate use of imagery. The song of abuse becomes the material through which the singers and the drummers control the Owu when they are becoming too wild and stubborn. For example, in the following song recorded in Olobiri and Burudani communities; Yemobowei Igarando and Perekeme Appah both had the puppet heads for the masquerades "Ibeze" (Dolphin), was abused in the song that was sung for the masquerade performances. In different arena, people said, their fathers had originally invented the songs and it has now become the signature songs for the masquerade (Ibeze) dolphin.

Sei Owu
Kuei ba da meni doo timi
Ibeze sei owu kuei ba da meni doo timi
Owube sonuma, sonuma.
Ibeze seiowu kuei ba da meni doo timi.

Translation:

Ugly Masquerade
(Ibeze) should kill and rest
Ibeze, the ugly masquerade should kill and rest
The masquerade in seven, seven (seven in group)
The masquerade (Ibeze) should kill and rest.

The expression is recognition of social experiences that cover the activities of the masquerade spirits. The masquerade is vested with spirit possession, use of proverbial language and prophesies. This is what J.P Clark calls "two vision". "The

possessed person sees the invisible world and prophesies and like her Greek counterpart, Cassandra, she speaks in tongues, in a language scarcely understood by the other person"(Egbe,13).

3.4 War Songs

War songs are fast and brief. The songs are accompanied by a chorus of yells. The songs are calculated to frighten, in still the spirit of bravery into the heart, and recall the heroic deeds of killing a strong animal or fish in the past. Apart from the defiant voice of bravado and boasting in the songs ,a general deep sense of sorrow or happiness as a result of the encounter is anticipated .For example, in the following songs, that attitude is portrayed.

Lolo Ogidi
Lolo ogidio, lolo ogidieee
Eee Owu lolo ogidi
Aru sai na toru bein beriba pelebo tubaka
Owu lolo ogidi.

Translation:

Wild Machete
Wild machete, wild machete
The masquerade is a wild warrior
Who will cross the river with canoe loaded
To cut plantain?
The masquerade is a wild machete.

Lolo Buo
Ugu beriberi Owueee
Owueee Ugu beriya
Owu bii lolo buo timi tamu torufa
Owu bii lolo buo timi tamu torufa
Ofrima Owu, uguberiya
Owu bii lolo buo timi tamu torufa

Translation:

War like
Uguberi is a masquerade
The masquerade known as sawfish
The masquerade is war like and got lost

The masquerade is war like and got lost
Shark or is it sawfish?
The masquerade is war like and got lost

War songs are some times more of an expression and reinforcement of the martial strength of the masquerades rather than a direct incitement to the fight or a part of the battle itself. However,“ several of the poems involve glorification, the expression of high morale, and very often, refer to the value relating to the war” (Finnegan,28). The songs in Owu tradition are eulogies and a challenge to other masquerades for a fight. “Lolo Ogidi” means war like or wild machete;“ Aru sai” means a canoe loaded and “torufa” means lost in the river.“Bein” Means cross.“Bereiba-pele” means cut or harvest plantain. Thus, in this context, the word means to kill, since“ tubaka”(who are you? Is a challenge in Owu song tradition and the language of the people.

3.5. Occupational Songs

The group listed as occupational songs includes songs that are peculiar and specific to certain trades. These songs are identifiable by the lore and tradition. They are hunters' song, fishermen's songs and farmers' songs. Example of occupational song is as follows:

Fani
Fani nanabo fani kan
Fani nanabo fani kan
Abadi torubo fani nanabo fani kan
Safuaghaye Biapele Ibado woooee
Owuoye Eferumoweni ibado wooee.

Translation:

Fence
The owner of the fence should destroy it
The owner of the fence should destroy it
In the ocean, fence owner should destroy it
I am not indebted; the masquerade (Biapele) has killed me
The masquerade named Eferumoweni has killed me.

3.6. Hunter's Songs

The hunter's songs contain imageries drawn from all aspects of forest life as a result of the core associated with the animals. The points can be illustrated from the Buffalo masquerade (Ogori) Song which has a long history. The masquerade is represented by an enormous carved wooden puppet head with great wooden horns and as a solitary figure. As it hums slowly into the arena, it is accompanied by this song:

Bou duo bo
Ogori bou bou duo bo
Ogori bou bou duo bo
Mani ileimo dein singhain kpo bunugha
Opu toru duo bo you kpo numugha
Bou bou duo bo.

Translation:

Come from Forest
Buffalo comes from the forest.
Buffalo comes from the forest.
It does not allow me to sleep in the night.
The big eye did not come from the physical realm.
It comes from the mythical realm.

The triumph and excitement of a successful kill and its aftermaths, thee motions of pride and grief and the thrill of pursuit are made manifest through the Owu songs and macabre or frenetic dance steps. The hardship and dangers of hunting are not forgotten, and they too are common subjects. The diction of the hunting song is simple and direct. They involve the glorification of the Owu and not humans; an expression of the fact that hunters show callous bravery. Hunting activities and the remembrance of the hunting episodes are reflected upon at a time removed from the actual hunt. The songs are most frequently performed on public occasions. All members of owu cultural society or tradition, and not just the individual heroes, are involved in the performances. According to the 'hunter core',the condition of the Buffalo in the song refers to old bulls who stand alone, leave the herd and move independently through the forest to destroy plantains. The "Ogori", "Oputoru" and "Bou duobo" are verbal images that portray the size and power of this solitary animal. In singing this line, the lead singer stretches the

words “Ogori bou bou duobo” to achieve a sonorous effect. This particular kind of song is only heard during owu masquerade performances.

3.7 Fishermen’s Songs

The fishermen’s songs are sung in invoking the water-spirits (masquerades) and ceremonies pertaining to specific nets. These songs go beyond being just mere fishing songs. The songs are part of the cultural reportorial accumulation used in specific functions pertaining to the group calling. This point can be illustrated from the following song:

Isoun Walai
Aru fa bo Isoun tieagha
Aru fa bo Isoun tieagha
Isoun mo walaieee
Aru fa bo Isoun tieagha
Isoun mo walai
O’dada Isoun mo walai.

Translation:

Masquerade (Isoun) Spread
An individual without canoe cannot go fishing Isoun.
An individual without canoe cannot go fishing Isoun.
The masquerade should disperse.
An individual without canoe cannot go fishing Isoun.
The masquerades (Isounmo-Plural) should disperse.
Father, the masquerade should disperse.

The structure of the song is simple depending functionally on repetition. Each of the owu songs is brought to an end by a long drawn final note, followed by a long low note, not really a part of the song itself.

3.8 Farmer’s Songs

The farmer’s songs are common in the owu songs as trado-religious poetry of the Ijaw

Translation:

Sweet Potato
If you eat me and praise me.

You teach me to be wicked.
Plant me as a good farmer.
I will grow big like yam.
If you throw me away, I will still grow well.
If you hang me on the branch of a tree, you become enemy.

In singing the lines, it appears as if the farmer is communicating with the crops. The potato crop is telling the farmer how it should be handled. This singular feature correlates with what an elderly woman in the tradition; Ikitiba who forbids eating and planting of sweet potato has to say:

Ari ugborogha, kuku-nduku mee ugbelekumo
Ari wa akina tinou gbanaba, barabi
Numugha; Sweet potato said, I should not plant him.
I hanged him on a branch of tree, didn't I know that, it is killing?

This is what she was told by the crop as if a human being was talking to her. Hence she stopped eating and planting potato crops. These farmers' songs exist in the Owu tradition because of the prominence given to the occupation.

3.9 Religious Songs

The third categories of songs are religious songs which include cult, healing, and oracular songs. The religious songs are ritual chants which dwells on lowly status; both physically and financially, but express thanks to the water-spirits. These groups of songs comment on the conditions like poverty, hunger, illness among others as conditions that are temporal. The songs are sung to musical accomplishment of drums and dance steps. Among the category of religious song are also cult songs. These songs are sung by a society of men who have killed men or dangerous animals such as leopard, tiger, lion, crocodile etc. and the songs are accompanied by rituals. The belief is that failure to perform chants, incantations and rituals is likely to cause havoc in the family. This fact can be illustrated from the song that follows:

Nama ba
Irowo nama bame.
Irowo keme bame.
Zini ama ko bamo.
Miebo miebo teiye.
I-kpo mieda teiye.

Translation:

Kill Animal
Praise, I killed an animal.
Praise, I killed a person
In different towns, I killed.
One is free if you have done it.
You should do and free yourself.

Ordinarily, an Ijaw man is allowed to say "Erowo", but not "Erowo keme bame" (I killed a person). The ordinary people can only sing a refrain in the song "Okome". This simple cult song is an ablution song to rid the members of the blood they have shed. "The burden of all this brought out in the song the victorious head-hunter is Timor dances to during his purification ceremony. We have offered the sacrifice to appease you. Your spirit may now rest and leave us at peace…" (Clark,9).

Healing Songs

The healing songs are sung to invoke the spirits and forces to parley and commune. These songs are sung in relation to prayers or request for good health. The words have both the mythical power of inducing confusion in the enemy and calling on the spirits to come into the midst of men. They are sung toward off sicknesses. "Requests, and prayers for good health, plentiful harvest, wisdom, especially children are made before the masquerade"(Emiemokumo 46). Here is a brief example:

Teme Ofin

Ofin yanrau oyoouo you (Kolokuma/Opokuma) people. The songs have a direct connection with agriculture. The occasions for the songs include clearing, hoeing, weeding, and harvesting. These points can be illustrated from the following song:

Kuku–nduku
Yeifideni imani iseridaba

Ari itolumo bolou seidou
Ebisi owei barani Igboro
Enibi ari burubara dubadou
Itangbeikpo, arisouni ebimongmi
Enighakpo tinbarabo isolobo bei nidiokowei.
Owu diri seimo maeee.
Ofin yanrau o you o you o.
Owu diri seimo.
Kala ind iowouo.

Translation:

Spiritual Sweep
Sweeper of the arena
Douse charms in the masquerade arena
Sweeper of the arena
Cleanse the masquerade arena
Where small fishes are confined

This song is a form of purification and sacrificial rite that results in the magical cleansing of the society of illnesses and evil deeds in the masquerade arena. It is a clear testimony that this song is sung to put the masquerades in good humor. The rituals usually follow immediately by a cleansing song. A beautifully attired masquerade sweeps the length and breadth of the town using a broom accompanied by song sixteen (16). The song is traditionally sung to douse any evil that awaits the masquerades and the entire community. In the words of Ekanpou, "the ritual consists of throwing garri mixed with red oil across the length and breadth of the town by a gorgeously dressed masquerade" (21). What is impressive is the allusive nature of the song. Symbolic expressions are used to hide the real meanings of the song. "Ofinyan-rau" means sweeper. Symbolically, it reveals a spiritual sweeping or cleansing of the arena and the people. "Owu diri seimo" means to neutralize charms done by evil men within and outside the masquerade arena. "Kalandiowou", refers to small fishes.

Oracular Songs

This is the third group classified under religious songs. The oracular songs are generally rendered in a heightened voice since they are part

of magic and share some similarities with the cult songs. The songs are sung sometimes to rebuke the masquerades. In the process of singing, libation is poured to the masquerades and ancestors who are invoked to give succor to the living. This is illustrated below:

Owu ama
Owu ebiebiama
Owu kpoebi
Kimi kpoebi
Orubiri seibuo gbadiowuama
Tememo meni beni duobo
O, seidiowuama
Uh! Uh! Uh!

Translation:

The Masquerades
Masquerades are splendid
Masquerades are beautiful.
The human beings are good.
Orubiri Masquerades speaks through dance-steps.
The spirits should come from the river.
All the masquerades can dance perfectly.
Uh! Uh!Uh!

Isoun Walai
Owu mo walaiyo
Isoun walai.
Owu mo walaiyo.
Isoun mo walai.

Translation:

A specie of small fishes (Isoun) should disperse.
The masquerades should disperse.
Small fishes (Isoun) should disperse.
The masquerades should disperse.
Small fishes should disperse.

The language of this song is incantatory and invocative. The quality of the song manifests in the economy of the words used in expressing the origin of the owu tradition of the Ijaw people. They are simple incantations used in nearly all owu songs invoking and cleansing of the arena before and after the performance. Song eighteen (18) is a special song, sung to denote the end of performance. This is mostly recited during performance and the last line is interrupted with characteristic yells from the singers to signify agreement and emphasis.

Conclusion

The study of Owu songs through both formalist and sociological lenses has revealed their rich literary and cultural significance. As trado-religious poetry, the songs are not only artistic expressions of language and form but also powerful conveyors of communal values, beliefs, and practices. The classification into social, occupational, and religious categories provides a functional understanding of the diverse roles these songs play within the Owu community. The formalist approach has underscored the structural beauty and linguistic craftsmanship embedded in the songs, while the sociological perspective has illuminated their role in shaping and reflecting social realities. Together, these approaches affirm that African oral traditions, such as Owu songs, deserve scholarly attention both as literary artifacts and as social documents that continue to shape cultural identity.

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